

This is a pre-print version of the final interview, details below:

De Loughry, Treasa, and Mike McCormack. “...a tiny part of that greater circum-terrestrial grid’: A Conversation with Mike McCormack.” *Irish University Review* 49.1 (2019): 105–116.

Special Issue on “Food, Energy, and Climate: Ireland in the World-Ecology.” Eds. Sharae Deckard and Lucy Collins.

<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/iur.2019.0383>

‘...a tiny part of that greater circum-terrestrial grid’¹: A Conversation with Mike McCormack

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Mike McCormack is an award winning writer and a lecturer in creative writing at the National University of Ireland, Galway. McCormack’s conscious rearticulation of the West of Ireland as a site of experimental modes of incarceration, virtual imaginaries, and energy regimes, addresses imaginative aporias around Ireland’s production of nature. His fiction can be interpreted in light of a theory of capitalism as the ‘force field’ which connects the ‘the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature’.² through often speculative literary modes that probe the interaction between culture, modernisation, and infrastructural modalities. The environments represented in his works are sites for the weird and uncanny, including near-future realities of offshore clone labour and robot citizenship, machinic fetishism, cloud seeding, and the technological sublime.

McCormack’s virtuosic explorations of the short story and novel forms open up new aesthetic and thematic avenues for speculative Irish literature, as they probe the interaction between underdevelopment, experimentation, and environmental crisis in the rural West.³ His first short story collection *Getting it in the Head* (1996), is concerned with the ghastly and addictive psychopathologies of Irish men, who literally ‘get it in the head’ by abusive brothers and fathers, and his first novel *Crowe’s Requiem* (1998) - a noir coming of age tale set in Galway City - combines Celtic mythology, doomed love, and gothic scientists.

McCormack’s fiction always take a generative critical stance towards Irish society and culture, and his second novel, *Notes From a Coma* (2005), with its combination of philosophical annotations, multi-perspectival form, and emphasis on the virtual and mundane, was in stark contrast to the mainstream Irish literature of the Celtic Tiger years. *Notes From a Coma* tells of JJ O’Malley, a Romanian orphan who enrolls voluntarily on an experimental ‘Somnos’ penal boat colony anchored in Killary Fjord. Placed into a coma, JJ’s biorhythms and brain waves are broadcast nationally, producing new modalities for national consciousness. McCormack’s second short story collection *Forensic Songs* (2012), likewise emphasised the omission of hyper-modern technologies and the fantastic in Irish literature, opening with an ironic commentary on misery memoirs, before delving into highly imaginative tales of divinely-authored game consoles, murderous children, and human-machine hybrids, grounded throughout in meditations on loneliness and alienation. However, in this interview McCormack expresses dissatisfaction with the ‘forensic accuracy’ of his writing, and *Solar Bones*, McCormack’s much-lauded 2016 novel, takes on the challenge of merging the quiet domesticity with a ghost story set on All Hallows’ Eve. As with

McCormack's *Notes From a Coma*, *Solar Bones*' is characterised by its formal experimentation, here a one sentence mode that feverishly compresses reflections on cryptosporidium, economic crises, and the subtle gradations of family life and individual memory. The effect is to align private ills with public health disasters, or what Marcus calls an adjacent collapse that acts as a 'gravitational pull we feel in everything around us now, the instability which thrills everywhere like a fever'⁴. In advance of this interview I was privileged to read McCormack's new work in progress: a draft collection of short stories which portrays the West of Ireland in science fictional terms. Set largely in Mayo, and replete with clones, hackers, and simulacra, they confirm that the West is a fecund site for future speculative imaginaries.

Speculative fictions sound a warning bell for the future, and McCormack's fictions uses the estrangement effect in powerful ways to make unreal the seemingly banal aspects of surveillance, virtual reality, and the individual as liability and asset in the nation's 'ideational' balance sheet.⁵ What better time then to write experimental and speculative Irish literatures than in this moment of mounting toxicity, climate change, economic instability, and technological development? In this interview McCormack reflects on a number of questions surrounding his own formal experimentation, the contiguities between religion and technology, contemporary developments in Irish science fiction, representations of rural Ireland, and the compositional rituals of the everyday.

Technology and Nature

I want to begin by discussing how technology is represented in in your works. In *Mass for Four Voices* or some of the stories in *Forensic Songs*, there is a sense of a technological sublime, where technology takes on some of the structures of religion—transformation, transmogrification, unreal promises.

Mike McCormack: I have always thought that the promise of religion, or the promise of faith more accurately, and the promise of technology, are one and the same thing—forgiveness, deliverance. The first short story I wrote 'Machine, Part II', is exactly what you're talking about. I might have come away from that idea, but I think I return to it, the technological sublime, the technological mystic. I'm a great believer in technology, and I'm utterly convinced that it is one of the glories of the human project, our machines. I came across a great quotation that I both like and distrust—'we believe in nature but we put our faith in technology'. We believe that nature *is*, but we think that our machines will come to deliver us. My belief in machines and engineering comes from my reading of science fiction in my middle to late teens, like *I Robot*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *Blade Runner*, and the introduction to JG Ballard's *Crash*. Those all convinced me that machines had such an incredible effect on our worlds and that they were affecting us in a core place. We were making these machines and sending them out into the world, and they were remaking us, so it was a two-way intercourse, or dialogue with our machines.

I went on to read philosophy of technology for two years in this university, NUI Galway, and I did it for a couple of reasons. In 1989 'Planet Earth' was 'The Man of the Year.' It was the first and only time that that *Time* magazine gave over their man/ woman of

the year to a thing, and they gave it over to Planet Earth, that was the year in which the environmental crisis went global. I read Martin Heidegger's essays, *The Question Concerning Technology*, and people like Don Ihde, and Hans Jonas. And that was my reading for a couple of years. I wasn't a good philosopher, but I started writing fiction, and by the time I should have sent in my MA thesis I'd a handful of short stories written, and they'd been published. There's a very gentle segue from my reading in philosophy into writing fiction temporally and mentally at that time.

Part of what I tried to do with Marcus is sing a hymn of praise to engineers, because engineers make the world. You've not read many novels with engineers at the heart of them, because it's the old snobbery of people in literature who have this crude notion of engineers as rude soulless mechanicals, who have no sense of the good, true and beautiful. I was never convinced of that. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is a great primer on the beauty of machinery and famously it spoke about how god is as visible in a motorcycle engine as he is in a lotus flower. I think god is no less visible in our machines than he is in our plants, and he's no less invisible in our machines than he is in our poetry and literature. And I wanted to sign a song of praise to what engineers do. Right from my early twenties I've had a sign hanging outside my imagination saying 'engineer wanted'. Marcus showed up and what I like about him is his complete and adult immersion in the world, and what seems to be a full life.

Science Fiction and Rural Ireland

You've spoken about the philosophy of technology and how it's informed the machinic fetishism within your work. However, I'm also interested in the continuum in your work between literary realism and speculative fiction—the mundanity and everydayness of some of your science fiction tales. For instance the mundanity of science fiction stories like 'On Being Sophia' in your upcoming collection, where clone Sophia discusses having to pay rent, and the corrosive effects of sea air on her skin; and in *Notes From a Coma*, where the technological depictions of mediated realities are almost very quotidian.

Mike McCormack: What you're talking about is the slide from the here and now into a year or two down the road, and that's really evident in *Notes From a Coma*. The background to the first half of that is historically correct, the breakup of Romania, the currency, the children's orphanages, those first forty, fifty pages, that's all contemporary realism. I started writing that book around the year 2000, and a lot of that was only 10 years old when I was writing it. But then the book morphs over into a speculative mode: my books tends to move from the here and now within a story, within a novel. In some way you see something similar like that happening in "All The Children Equal"⁶ with the gas exploration of Broadhaven off Mayo, and the next thing you know we're 20/30 years down the road and this rig is being manned by immigrant workers and clones. So there is very much a movement from the present moment.

I always write the books that come to me, but I have one deliberate project, and that is to see the West of Ireland as a science fiction landscape. The rest of the books I write, I don't

want to be too mystical about these things, but there's a sense that you're laying yourself open for every book might come your way. I always say my *modus operandi* is if the book could write how would it write itself? I'm not interested in what I have to say, I'm interested in what this book has to say, the shape, the tone of voice it would take.

To go back to the point about the intermixture of near-future speculative elements with realism, there is a sense in which that mixed register is particularly apt for our contemporary moment when we can't yet fully grasp the consequences of the technologies we use and have. One of the things your fiction does very powerfully is to depict the convergence of epidemiological, economic, ecological, and private crises together, of all these different interdependent relations and scales that make up the natural and built environment. There's a world-building project throughout your work, and even in this new West of Ireland speculative short story collection interconnected thematics and characters related to that very particular landscape reappear.

Mike McCormack: My pen just defaults to Louisburgh the minute I put it to paper, and maybe a time will come when it won't do that, but for the moment that's the gravity in my pen, and that's the pull in the steering. I've always thought that this is my fount of ground, this is something that I know about, and can rely upon, because it's going to get strange after this, anything can happen. As Marcus says the 'rites, rhythms and rituals'. I know these places and they're something to steer by, because after this it becomes speculative, because I've no difficulty with clones and robots and spaceships, and it might very well happen in these fields.

One of the common riffs in your depiction of the environment is that of the bog not quite seeming what it is, in that sense that you've decided to narrate the West of Ireland not as a romantic wilderness, or in archaic terms, but rather as hyper-modern and under-developed at the same time—the landscape is contradictory, so that we have the ruins of older energy regimes like peat bog lands and the older technologies we used to mine or to transform the land, but then that coexists with wind turbines and the hypermodernity of gas fields. Can you discuss why you've decided to represent the West the way you do?

Mike McCormack: That's one of the things that I've always protested at—the depiction of rural Ireland in certain genres, I have a real objection to it, it takes the most simplistic, brutalist approaches to it, that we're pretty crude people. There's a fundamental lack of decency in an awful lot of these depictions of rural Ireland. My experience of rural Ireland is smart, decent people, who are neighbourly and won't see you stuck; there's also a professional rural class that no one seems to acknowledge. There are people out there engaged in very imaginative projects, and I've always seen rural Ireland as a place of imagination, endeavour, decency, family, community, all the better aspects of those things. That's actually the real experiment at the heart of *Solar Bones*. *Solar Bones* is about a white middle aged man who has no material want, who loves his wife, son and daughter, and he

lacks nothing. That was the real experiment—give me a decent happy man, and make a novel out of that.

Marcus is a decent man, who has a profound perspective on his profession and a civic sense of how it shapes his community and environment. But *Solar Bones* also discusses how bodies and environments are reshaped by politics and forms of maldevelopment. Mairead gets sick because of cryptosporidium; Marcus is arguing that water infrastructure, waste disposal plans, building plans, and so forth, need to be improved, but all this cronyism and political hawing and development for short-term profit is interrupting or wasting his plans for the long-term public good. There's a play on ideas of waste and wasting throughout your texts, whether in *Notes from a Coma*, where the Somnos ship is a place for wasted lives and placed off the west of Ireland; or the idea that bogs are sites of old wasted technologies; or that cryptosporidium is literally caused by waste, by excrement. There's a conscious register in your texts of the consequences of the uneven development of the west of Ireland, its effects on environments and human subjects.

Writing about such issues which largely come under the rubric of 'political', I'm surprised to find myself writing so politically, because while I've a great interest in politics, I've a big distrust of my own opinions. What seems to have happened is that my books raise political issues, but they don't write about ideologies such as Marxism, or nationalism, or socialism, what they actually write about is citizenship. What rights, responsibilities, and crucially what vulnerabilities you have as a citizen? It's played out in a rather explicit fashion in *Notes From a Coma*, where JJ becomes a ward of the state. I always saw JJ as being at the centre of a concentric circle of caring, and the immediate one was his father, his lover, his neighbour, his teacher, and his political representative, and these are the concentric circles of care, and they're all the people who gave him voice in the book, and their job was to speak him into being and to protect him so that people did not forget him, and did not forget that he was vulnerable. My books talk about development, and people's interaction with development, but citizenship, the man or the woman with the vote, that seems to be the hero of my political narrative.

Temporal Rhythms

I want to turn to the representation of time and space in your texts. One of the definitions of the 'Solar Bones' of your novel's title could be the temporal rituals and rhythms that bind, those cycles and rhythms that emerge from both the natural world and human society. There's a whole beautiful passage on the built environment—the description of the uncanny rhythms of the houses, pulsing with the electricity and water running in their walls, or the roads and infrastructures that literally bind communities together and situate them in environments—the phrase you use is 'the circum-terrestrial grid.' Could you say more about the role such everyday temporalities play in the narrative composition and form of your fiction?

Mike McCormack: Temporal rhythms are a recurring motif in my books, and I think being a farm boy gives you a really grounded sense of temporal rhythm. Rhythms are predicative, that's why we like them, that's why we like ACDC and Black Sabbath because we know what's going to happen next in the song. Similarly, a farmer can project themselves over 12 months, they know where they're going to be, what they're going to be doing, and that's a yearly rhythm, the seasonal cycles. But within the day there's the diurnal rhythm and the rhythm of daily tasks, then there's a smaller rhythm within that, and then there's even smaller rhythms within that again, and there's something communal about it as well. You knew that when you'd look over the field that your neighbour was probably doing the exact same thing, you're bound together in these rhythms.

When I was growing up, standing at my kitchen window at 8 o'clock in the morning I knew every single car going on the road, I knew where they were going, who they were, where they came from. That was a bonding element, something you could rely on. The negative side was that looking at it would bore you to tears, it was comforting and boring at the same time, but those were the human rhythms, and as a farmer you're aware of natural rhythms of light and weather and time.

And there was the ecclesiastical rhythm of the church rhythm: I was an altar boy for years and that was something that stayed with me. And the nearest timekeeper is in your heart it's in your chest, it's right there, we are timekeeping beings, we have a systolic rhythm, an aortal rhythm. All these things were constant preoccupations. In *Solar Bones* there's an attempt to pick up a systolic rhythm that pulls you along. I'm told it's quite a rhythmic reading experience and that notably the first couple of pages are twitchy and difficult.

Well, Marcus is twitchy because he doesn't know what's happened, he's twitching out of the in-between space from which he's being called, and the denial of being a ghost and desire to re-root himself in his material reality. As a writer, how do you do that trick of calling a soul into being without them being aware that they're being called back, or where it is they're being called from, or what it is that's happened or that they are this disembodied soul? It's done very subtly.

Mike McCormack: He keeps talking to himself and asserting his own name. Those were the hardest pages of the book to write, I was never sure that I got it right. The whole technique of *Solar Bones* was very conscious. I've written four books and I was quite conscious that I had almost written to a forensic accuracy in some of the pieces. Because of my philosophical background there was a lot I liked about that accuracy and penetration, but I was very aware that that concentration on specifics leaves out a lot of the mess of the human condition that falls outside of those forensic sentences. How do you get around that? The obvious way is to write a massive all-encompassing book, but what I did was write one massive sentence or at least part of a sentence. People say the book is one sentence, as far as I understand it the book is an excerpt from a sentence that extends from before the beginning of the book, and after it has closed. It's a few clauses from the middle of the sentence, it's just an excerpt from a sentence.

Because there's no full stop to the eternity of the ghost?

Mike McCormack: No and it comes in, the words drift onto the page and it ends on half a blank page as well, which is part of the design of the book that it would fall on half a blank page. That blank half space is part of the punctuation of the book. The way those words mirror that blank page at the start of the book, and even the way the words kind of drift onto the page was very definitely part of the design of the book. And we talked about that.

This was the design of the book that came after, or the book form forcing the content?

Mike McCormack: It came at a later stage. Books, if they're sufficiently healthy and vigorous, the time comes when they design themselves. I wanted it to fall on the right hand page as well, that's not chance, that's part of the punctuation of the book. People forget that this book is only an hour long, it's strung between two markers, one is a divine marker and the other is a temporal marker, again, scale. There's the angelus bell and there is the time signal for the one o'clock news. The book is strung between those two temporal markers and once you have those two bookings in place then you've got both a perimeter and two elevated points to reach. It's hugely enabling and it has a tidiness in my mind. *Solar Bones* was always directional. Even though I use the word riverine about *Solar Bones* it's riverine in the later meandering stages of a river, when its meanders loop round on each other, but it is always heading towards the sea. And it there was going to be no full stop because I was interested in chasing a rhythm and seeing where the exercise would go. There are small little oases of clarity and then it loops off and then it repeats. This is one of my tropes as a writer and as a person is that I repeat myself a lot. But I like writers who repeat themselves, and I like writers who write the same book, that's why I like JG Ballard, and Beckett.

It's a certain perfection of style. But what *Solar Bones* does is repetition with a difference. There's a play on opposites in Marcus's meanderings when he's trying to loop back to something he said earlier, as when he talks about assembly: the assemblages of engineering, the compositional imaginary of the urban planner, the luminous bones of the universe, or the seemingly unimaginable structures of reality and the chaotic threat of their disassembly. Marcus talks about how as a child he was intensely fearful when his father took apart the tractor.

Mike McCormack: He saw the dissolution of the universe, not just a tractor, he saw the universe coming part.

Like a narrative unravelling too of the totality of the text, if you think of that as a world in itself. So that compositional rhythm of ravelling and unravelling drives the looping of the text, but it always feels like things have shifted on, because there's always a flow onwards.

Mike McCormack: –I think it's circling back just to move slightly forward and maybe what I used to think was going round in circles actually might just be a rising spiral. There's a great

essay by Martin Heidegger's called 'The Identity of Identity' and it appears to go around in circles but all of a sudden it leaves you up on a height looking down upon the original idea. It it's a wonderful piece and you have to almost hold onto the edge of the table yourself or you'll be caught up in this spiral, and you hadn't even quite noticed the slight gradient and the emotional ascent.

Form and Speculative Writing

I'd like to continue on to ask you more generally about form. What formal choices arise as you move between the short story and the novel? What are the interactions between these forms and narrative structure, and how do you use those to represent the scales of interrelation that make up the environment or world of the text?

Mike McCormack: My notion of form I learned as a philosopher, and I came away from philosophy with a sense of structure, rigour, intellectual progress. I began to see that form and structure was not corseting, but a scaffolding, as it allowed you to climb higher, see further, look down, see deeper. If you look at my short stories, particularly my first collection *Getting it in the Head*, you see so many structural templates and stories poured into them, alphabets, quizzes, introductions to catalogues, they were a great help to a young writer. Structure allows me to build a story, and they're kind of exoskeletal structures. *Crowe's Requiem* presents more of a difficulty, in that bows and tips its hat to the structures and tropes of fairytales.

I think of my books visually, I envisage them, books don't have to be just written they have to be built. People talk about the experiment of *Solar Bones* and they always refer to the one sentence aspect of the book. They seems to be saying experimental novels are always fragmented, and antagonistic to the reader, you always have to roll up your sleeves and work hard. In many ways I always thought that that book was quite conservative in its assessment, *Solar Bones* seems to say being human is about being harmonic, and unified. People have spoken about being carried along by the reading of it, those weren't conscious decisions on my part when I started *Solar Bones*. The books I write, the books that come to me, seem to have a preoccupation with form, and want to deliver themselves in a formal construct.

Many of your influences are visual artists. Do you think that's given you a different attitude towards literary innovation and what it means to write an Irish novel?

Mike McCormack: In my twenties I wrote all my work in the city, I spent all my time in shared houses, with painters, photographers, sculptors, and video artists. I didn't meet a writer until I was 29 or 30, and so my education in the formative years as a writer was with visual artists. So for better or worse the visual plays a big sense in my work. I was taught how to stand and look at things, and that's important because I actually have to make a concentrated wilful effort. I was taught about colour, light, shade, the movement of those things and that was a really important part of my education as a writer, the time I spent with visual artists. I once read a quotation to the effect that the only thing that's democratically

distributed is light and air, and so far no one has yet found ways to privatise it. Having said that, we could think about the origins of the phrase ‘daylight robbery’ in a tax in nineteenth century, when a tax was put on windows.

--That’s why Bank of Ireland on College Green blocked up some of the windows to avoid the window tax--

Mike McCormack: They did find a way of taxing light. But in terms of my relation to Irish writing, I always thought that being an Irish writer was a huge opportunity, because we had such brilliant progenitors, and I thought Irish fiction was an unusual culture in that our great writers are exclusively our experimental writers. Joyce, Flann, and Samuel Beckett, that’s our Mount Rushmore, our Mount Olympus, and I found that they handed us a licence to go forth and experiment. I found that hugely enabling, I didn’t find it a stricture, and I think so many writers of my generation found their achievement disabling and overshadowing. The experimental tradition that’s what we do, it is our spinal tradition, our important tradition. I’d like to think that my work was of a piece with the generosity and pioneering spirit of those people, I’d like to think that I did something to push out the consideration of it into a speculative area where it doesn’t have much of a presence.

Throughout your work, there’s a co-articulation between your allusions to the ‘holy trinity’ of the Irish modernists but also the references you make to writers like Jorge Luis Borges, J. G. Ballard, or Thomas Pynchon.

Mike McCormack: The more speculative element, yes. I was very conscious of the fact that as Irish writers we do memory and history, we don’t do speculation and metaphysics, and that’s what I wanted to do, that was the division that I set up rightly or wrongly in my own head. When you set out as a writer you’re looking for all sorts of ways forward. When I started writing in the beginning, I envisioned myself as the bastard love child of McGahern, Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, and JG Ballard, if they conceived a child at a crossroads in the middle of the night.

--In Mayo?

Mike McCormack: In Mayo, yes, I would be that that that bastard offspring, because as far as I was concerned there wasn’t enough Ballard in McGahern, and there wasn’t enough McGahern in Ballard, and rightly or wrongly and in all youthful arrogance I seemed to think that I was able to correct that. So those are the shapes you throw in your imagination.

Earlier we discussed how you use speculative elements, and throughout your work, a localised world-building project to narrate the convergence of multiple socio-ecological crises in the West of Ireland—a site often rendered in romantic terms, rather than one traversed by contested energy regimes. Aside from the generative use of such speculative narrative modes in your own work, I’m interested in what you think of the future of Irish speculative writing more widely?

Mike McCormack: In my twenty odd years as a writer, I think this is one of the most exciting times for the generation behind me. June Caldwell's written one or two sci-fi stories, Oisín Fagan in *Hostages*, and there's an experimental twist out there, from people like Rob Doyle, Claire Louise Bennett writing *Pond*, and Danny Denton in Cork, so there's a lot more experimental writing going on. Partially the reason is that young Irish writers are going to Irish editors for the first time in my time as a writer. They're going to *Stinging Fly*, *Tramp Press*, *New Island*. *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland*, Mia Gallagher, that's a big novel, but only an Irish publisher would take that on, because it's speculative, it ranges through time and consideration.

These younger Irish writers are getting their first editorial tuning with Irish editors, it's really important. There's a brilliant essay by Desmond Fennell which argues that there's no such thing as Irish fiction as long as Irish writers are pitching their work at English publishers and editors.⁷ He says it's because we have to detune ourselves to make ourselves coherent. I've long suspected something like that because of the questions you have to clarify for English editors. But these young writers that I've all mentioned, with the exception of Danny Denton, they've all gone first to Irish editors, and they have been sieved through Irish editors into English publishers. Which I think is the best way—we need English publishers because they have the numbers, they have the distribution. But it came as a wonderful shock to me when during my last two books I sat down with Irish editors, and I thought, 'This is good I don't have to explain that much, they know what I'm talking about.' And then to an even more compelling extent, the editorial process with *Solar Bones* at Tramp Press was that I didn't have to translate, and what struck me about it was the truth of Fennell's argument that we hadn't been *writing* before, we'd been *translating* ourselves.

Notes

¹ Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016), p. 129.

² Tom Keefer and Jason W. Moore, "Wall Street is a Way of Organizing Nature: An interview with Jason Moore" (*Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action* 12. May 2011), p. 42.

³ Mike McCormack's works include the following: *Getting it in the Head* (1996); *Crowe's Requiem* (1998); *Notes From a Coma* (2005); *Forensic Songs* (2012); *Solar Bones* (2016).

⁴ Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016), p. 19.

⁵ McCormack, *Notes from a Coma*, note on p. 160.

⁶ Mike McCormack 'All the Children Equal', *Stinging Fly* 33.2 (2016), n. pag.
<https://stingingfly.org/2016/02/01/all-the-children-equal/>, accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

⁷ Desmond Fennell. *Cutting to the Point: Essays and Objections, 1994-2003* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2004).